



**ANCESTRAL TEACHINGS FOR ALL TIMES:
SACRED WISDOM OF STRENGTH AND STRUGGLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THERE IS NOT A DAY THAT DAWNS that I do not read, remember and meditate on the sacred wisdom and mind-expanding insights of our ancestors—whether from my mother and father, and other members of my family, communal teachers, ordinary persons with uplifting advice, or the words and ways of the great whose very lives are invaluable lessons and whose words and deeds mark out the right and righteous way forward for us and future generations. And then, there are our sacred texts of various names with similar notions of the good and necessary ways forward and upward by speaking truth, doing justice, being kind, loving and respecting each other, developing internal strength and waging righteous and relentless struggle for the good, the right and the possible. Among these sacred texts are the *Husia* of ancient Egypt and the *Odu Ifa* of ancient Yorubaland which along with sacred wisdom from other sources, as stated above, serve as the foundation and framework for my understanding and assertion as an African man and human being in the world.

Here, I want to share some insights from the *Odu Ifa*, the sacred text of the spiritual and ethical tradition of Ifa which is one of the great sacred texts of the world and a classic of African and world literature. These passages and those I've used before in these and other writings are taken from my translation of and commentary on this sacred text in the book titled *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings* (Sankore Press). To share, I choose these passages: Odu 1:1, Odu 33:1 and Odu 191:1 with commentaries.

Odu 1:1 says “Let us not engage the world hurriedly. Let us not grasp at the rope of wealth impatiently. That which should be treated with mature judgment, let us not deal with in a state of uncontrolled passion. When we arrive at a cool and peaceful place, let us

rest fully. Let us give continuous attention to the future. And let us give deep consideration to the consequences of things. And this because of our eventual passing.”

This is a teaching on having a measured approach to achieving the good life. It reflects the Odu stress on the virtue of *iwon*, balance, and the *amuwon*, the balanced person. The good or moral life, the teaching tells us, also necessitates that we treat important matters with the reasonableness and calmness they require. We are not to engage the world in a hurried, heedless or reckless manner. Nor are we to seek material gain impatiently. For although Odu ethics poses wealth as one of the blessings of life, as well as an important condition to live a truly full life and a means to aid and share with others, there is continuous concern that pursuit of material gain not be excessive or all-consuming.

Moreover, the text suggests that the good life also requires that we know when and how to rest. It poses rest as an essential condition not only for the good life in general, but also specifically for serious moral and critical reflection. Finally, the text tells us that we should give full and ongoing attention to the future and be constantly and profoundly concerned about the consequences of things. This dual moral emphasis speaks to our need to be concerned with the effect of our actions, not only on the quality of life and relations in the contemporary world, but also on the future of the world and generations to come. And thus it has particular moral meaning, not only for the quality of human relations, but also for the protection, care and preservation of the environment.

Such moral concern, the text suggests, is to be embraced not only for the good life here, but also to secure our place in eternity given our eventual passing. In a word, it speaks to our need to live a life that leaves a legacy of

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goodness in this world which not only promises respectful memory in this world, but also eternal life in the next.

Odu 33:1 says: “The liar dies and dies in a forest of fire. The wicked dies and dies on a sun-scorched savannah. But the righteous dies and dies peacefully, leaning back against a water jar, decorated with jewels. Orunmila, priest of the world, interpreted the teachings of Ifa for the people of the world when they were creating a world, a world where there was no peace and a world where there was no harmony. They were advised to sacrifice. But only the righteous remained to practice sacrifice. *So, speak truth, do justice, be kind, and do not do evil.* Truth travels on a narrow path, but the wicked wander on a wide road. Speak truth; do justice. Do justice and speak truth. For one who is righteous is supported by the Divine”.

This is a teaching on the need and value of righteousness in the world. The wrongdoer who lies and is cruel is portrayed as one who does not find cool relief, but rather searing heat signified by the “forest of fire” and the “sun-scorched savannah”. These metaphors for the heat and discomfort are contrasted with the metaphor of leaning against the jeweled water jar which signifies not only relaxation in wealth, but also a coolness or calmness suggested by the image of water.

The verse urges us to practice two of the cardinal virtues of Ifa and Maatian ethics: truth and justice. And it assures us that the righteous who practice these will be favored by the Divine. The verse also encourages us to “be kind and not do (or be) evil”. This joining of kindness, another cardinal virtue, to

truthfulness and justice is key to the care and responsibility we must feel and exercise toward one another. For both truth and justice can be harsh, even insensitive in their application. But it is with loving kindness that they are balanced and serve their essential function of bringing and supporting good in the world. And it is through kindness that the moral excellence of *iwapele*, gentle character, is grounded and flourishes.

Finally, Odu 191:1 says: “It is through constantly studying Ifa that we come to understand Ifa. It is through missing the way that we come to know the way. It is the road we have not traveled before that causes us to wander here and there.” This is a teaching on the discipline of learning, learning even from mistakes and the good and value of following various roads, constantly searching here, there and everywhere for the good so that we may learn it, do it, embody it and live it.

Surely, the Odu Ifa is one of the essential ways forward on the upward path of our ancestors. And it offers a rich resource and reward to those who, as the Odu Ifa says, “Wake early in the morning, mediate and think deeply about their actions” (245:1). Indeed, the text says, if we seek advice from Odu Ifa, “We will not come up empty-handed” (2:5); and we will be able to “cultivate good character, acquire wisdom (and) be at peace inside and out” (82:1). Or again, “If we listen to the teachings of Ifa, we will last like our ancestors lasted” (23:2), i.e., ethically grounded, spiritually uplifted, and an honored model and eternal guide for bringing and enjoying good in the world.

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